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AUTHOR	Levitt, Mary J.; Crooks, Noel A.; Bustos, Gaston L.; Santos, Jennifer D.; Telan, Paige; Silver, Marcia E.; Branscum, Emily; Levitt, Jerome L.
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ABSTRACT

Parent and friend support, family stress, and economic hardship are examined as mediators of well-being for 782 African-American, European-American, and Hispanic-American 4th and 6th graders from middle and low income schools. Of these, 172 were immigrants. Well-being indices included loneliness, self-concept, depression, and teacher-rated happiness. Ethnicity and income, but not immigration, effects were mostly eliminated when support, stress, and hardship were included as predictors in regression analyses, consistent with a mediational model. Associations to well-being were positive for parent and peer support and negative for stress and hardship, although some effects varied by grade, ethnicity, or school economic level. The importance of considering children's well-being within the context of a broader social ecology was affirmed. (Author/MKA)

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THE SOCIAL ECOLOGY OF WELL-BEING IN MIDDLE CHILDHOOD[1]

Mary J. Levitt, Noel A. Crooks, Gastón L. Bustos, Jennifer D. Santos,

Paige Telan, Marcia E. Silver, Emily Branscum

Florida International University

and

Jerome L. Levitt

Miami-Dade County Public Schools

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ABSTRACT

Parent and friend support, family stress, and economic hardship were examined as mediators of well-being for 782 African-American, European-American, and Hispanic-American 4th and 6th graders from middle and low income schools. Of these, 172 were immigrants. Well-being indices included loneliness, self-concept, depression, and teacher-rated happiness. Ethnicity and income (but not immigration) effects were mostly eliminated when support, stress, and hardship were included as predictors in regression analyses, consistent with a mediational model. Associations to well-being were positive for parent and peer support and negative for stress and hardship, although some effects varied by grade, ethnicity, or school economic level. The importance of considering children's well-being within the context of a broader social ecology was affirmed.

INTRODUCTION

Support from both family members and friends has been linked to psychological adjustment by early adolescence, but the conjoint effects of family and friendship support on well-being in middle childhood have been less well established. Furthermore, support-well-being relations have rarely been considered within the context of the child's broader ecology. The focus of this report is on psychological well-being in middle childhood in a sample of children varying in levels of demographic risk, family stress, and economic hardship. Demographic risk factors were immigration, race/ethnicity, and school poverty. The sample included African-American, European-American, and Hispanic-American 4th and 6th graders attending schools in low or middle income neighborhoods. Well-being indices were loneliness, self concept, depression, and teacher-rated happiness.

Disentangling the effects of ethnicity, immigration, and income level is often difficult, but the size and cultural breadth of the present sample afforded the opportunity to do so. The data gathered in this study allow an assessment of the extent to which familial and economic stress and social support serve as proximal links in associations of minority status, immigration, and poverty to well-being. In related research, Bolger, Patterson, Thompson, & Kupersmidt (1995) observed detrimental effects of family economic hardship on self-esteem in three cohorts of African-American and European-American elementary school children. Felner et al. (1995) reported that parental support and stressful life events mediated the relation of economic disadvantage to depression and self-esteem in a sample of African-American and European-American adolescents. The present study extends this research on proximal mediators to middle childhood and incorporates a Hispanic-American subsample; it also includes both self-reported and teacher-reported indices of well-being, along with measures of parental and peer support.

METHOD

Sample

Participants included 782 students (51% female) in grades 4 (N = 394) and 6 (N = 388) attending eight public elementary schools. Of these schools, four were located in economically distressed areas, with 87%-98% of students enrolled in the federal free/reduced lunch program, and four were located in middle income areas. The sample was 31% African-American, 29% European-American and 40% Hispanic-American. Of these, 172 were immigrant children who were predominantly from Latin-American and Caribbean countries. Participant children were interviewed individually at school. Interviewers were matched to the child by ethnicity.

Measures

Social Support. Support information was obtained via the social network mapping procedure (Levitt, Guacci-Franco, & Levitt, 1993). Children first arranged their social network members in a concentric circle diagram, with the closest, most important persons placed in the inner circle of the diagram. They then identified persons who provided each of six support functions representing affective, self-affirmation, and instrumental domains. Functions provided by parents and by friends were summed to create parental and friend support indices.

Family Stress and Economic Hardship. As part of the interview, children were asked whether any of 16 stressful life events had happened to their families in the past year (Johnson, 1986). Items included, for example, death or serious illness of a family member, a family move, and whether any family member had been robbed or attacked. Economic hardship was assessed with a single item asking how often the family has difficulty paying for essential needs, such as food, clothing, or rent. Scores ranged from 1 "Never" to 5 "Almost Always".

Well-Being. Three well-being measures were obtained during the interview: the Children's Loneliness Scale (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984), the Self Perception Profile (Harter, 1985), and the Children's Depression Inventory--Short Form (Kovacs, 1985). As an external index of well-being, teachers rated the child's happiness on a single item scale, "How happy is he/she [compared to typical students of the same age]?" (Edelbrock & Achenbach, 1984). Scores ranged from 1 "Much Less" to 7 "Much More".

RESULTS

The proposed mediational model was assessed with a series of multiple regression analyses. First, direct effects of the demographic risk factors on the well-being indices were assessed, as were the effects of these factors on the stress and support measures (Table 1 and first figure). Next, the proposed mediators (parent and friend support, family stress, and economic hardship) were included in regressions of the demographic variables to the well-being measures (Table 2 and second figure). Also included were multiplicative terms representing the interactions of the demographic and mediating factors (Table 2). Grade and sex were included in each analysis as it was possible that the effects of interest would vary by grade level or gender, but these variables are absent from the figures to simplify the presentation.

Comparing the two figures illustrates the results regarding the hypothesized mediation effects. Including the stress, hardship, and support measures as predictors eliminated the initial effects of ethnicity and reduced the significance of school poverty to only the teacher-rated happiness measure. Direct links to loneliness and depression remained, however, for immigrant children. There was only one significant gender effect; girls were rated as happier than boys by their teachers.

There were no interactions of stress or economic hardship with the social support

variables, indicating that stress, hardship, and support contributed independently to well-being. The few significant interactions of the demographic factors by the mediating variables (Table 2) revealed that the stress and support effects varied to some extent by school economic status, grade, and ethnicity. Friend support was linked to (less) loneliness in low income children and to teacher-rated happiness for African-American and Hispanic-American children. Parent support was more salient for older children in relation to self-concept and for both older and nonimmigrant children with respect to happiness. The association of family stress to depression was more significant for middle income children, whereas economic hardship was more predictive of depression for children in low income schools.

DISCUSSION

The results contribute to a growing body of literature on psychosocial adjustment in middle childhood. African-American and Hispanic-American children and children in low income neighborhoods experienced higher levels of family stress and economic hardship and lower levels of parental support, which, in turn, predicted greater loneliness, lower self esteem, and more depressed affect. These results are consistent with a mediational model and suggest specifically that familial and economic stress and social support are proximal mediators of demographic risk. This was not the case, however, for immigrant children and further research is needed with this population.

Overall, the observed relations of support to well-being were more pronounced for parental than for peer support, but lower support from friends was related to loneliness, particularly for low-income children. Friend support was also related to teacher-rated happiness, especially for African-American and Hispanic-American children. As the loneliness and happiness measures are each focused on affective well-being in the school context, friend support

may be especially salient within this environment. Furthermore, friend support may offset, to some extent, the reduced capacity of parents in distressed families to provide support. Parental support was related to well-being across grade levels, but the effects were stronger for the older children. This may reflect advances in self-reflection or greater reliance on parental support for self esteem maintenance as peer group relations become more important.

Stress was related to depression differentially for middle and low income children. Middle income children with higher family stress were more likely to be depressed, whereas economic hardship was more predictive of depression in low income children. Additional analyses with this sample suggest that extended family relations may rally to provide support in the context of stressful life events, but may not be able to offset the effects of economic hardship. Middle income children are less likely to be deprived of basic necessities as a result of parental economic difficulties, but they may have fewer extended family members available or willing to provide support in the context of familial life stress.

In sum, the findings are consistent with a mediational model of relations between demographic risk factors and well-being outcomes in middle childhood. Family stress, economic hardship, and parental and peer support served as proximal links in analyses of the effects of ethnicity and poverty on indicators of psychological well-being. Planned longitudinal follow-up of the present sample will further define the evolution of support-well-being relations for this diverse multicultural population of children across the transition to adolescence. In general, the study heeds the call to move beyond "social address" models toward exploration of developmental processes in all of their contextual complexity (Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996).

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Table 1. Direct Effects of Demographic Risk Factors

	Loneliness		Self Concept		Depression		Happiness	
Predictors	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2
Sex	-.03	<.01	.07	<.01	<.01	<.01	.13***	.02
Grade	-.08*	.01	.07*	.01	-.07	<.01	-.05	<.01
Af.-Amer.	.05	<.01	-.11*	.01	.05	<.01	-.02	<.01
Hs.-Amer.	-.04	<.01	-.13**	.01	.03	<.01	-.11*	.01
Immigration	.07*	.01	-.04	<.01	.10**	.01	.05	<.01
Sch. Poverty	.12**	.01	-.16****	.02	.11**	.01	-.19****	.03
	Family Stress		Econ Hardship		Parent Sup.		Friend Sup.	
Predictors	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2
Sex	-.04	<.01	-.06	<.01	<.01	<.01	.03	<.01
Grade	-.07*	.01	-.08*	.01	-.01	<.01	.13***	.02
Af.-Amer.	.20****	.02	.04	<.01	-.18***	.02	-.25****	.03
Hs.-Amer.	.10*	.01	.13**	.01	-.12*	.01	-.10*	.01
Immigration	-.05	<.01	-.04	<.01	-.04	<.01	-.03	<.01
Sch. Poverty	.22****	.04	.20****	.03	.18****	.03	.02	<.01

Note. *b* = standardized beta weight; r^2 = the proportion of variance accounted for by each predictor.

$^{****}p < .0001$; $^{***}p < .001$; $^{**}p < .01$; $^{*}p < .05$.

Table 2. Regression Analyses Including Stress and Support

	Loneliness		Self Concept		Depression		Happiness	
Predictors	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2
Sex	-.02	<.01	.05	<.01	.01	<.01	.12***	.02
Grade	-.05	<.01	.04	<.01	-.05	<.01	-.07*	.01
Ethnicity								
Af.-Amer.	-.03	<.01	-.03	<.01	-.01	<.01	.05	<.01
Hs.-Amer.	-.09	<.01	-.07	<.01	-.02	<.01	-.07	<.01
Immigration	.08*	.01	-.04	<.01	.11**	.01	.05	<.01
Sch. Poverty	.05	<.01	-.06	<.01	.02	<.01	-.13**	.01
Stress	.14***	.02	-.12**	.01	.20****	.03	-.13***	.02
Hardship	.11**	.01	-.16****	.03	.13***	.02	-.02	<.01
Support								
Parent	-.11**	.01	.19****	0.04	-.13**	.02	.14****	.02
Friend	-.11**	.01	.06	<.01	.03	<.01	.07*	.01

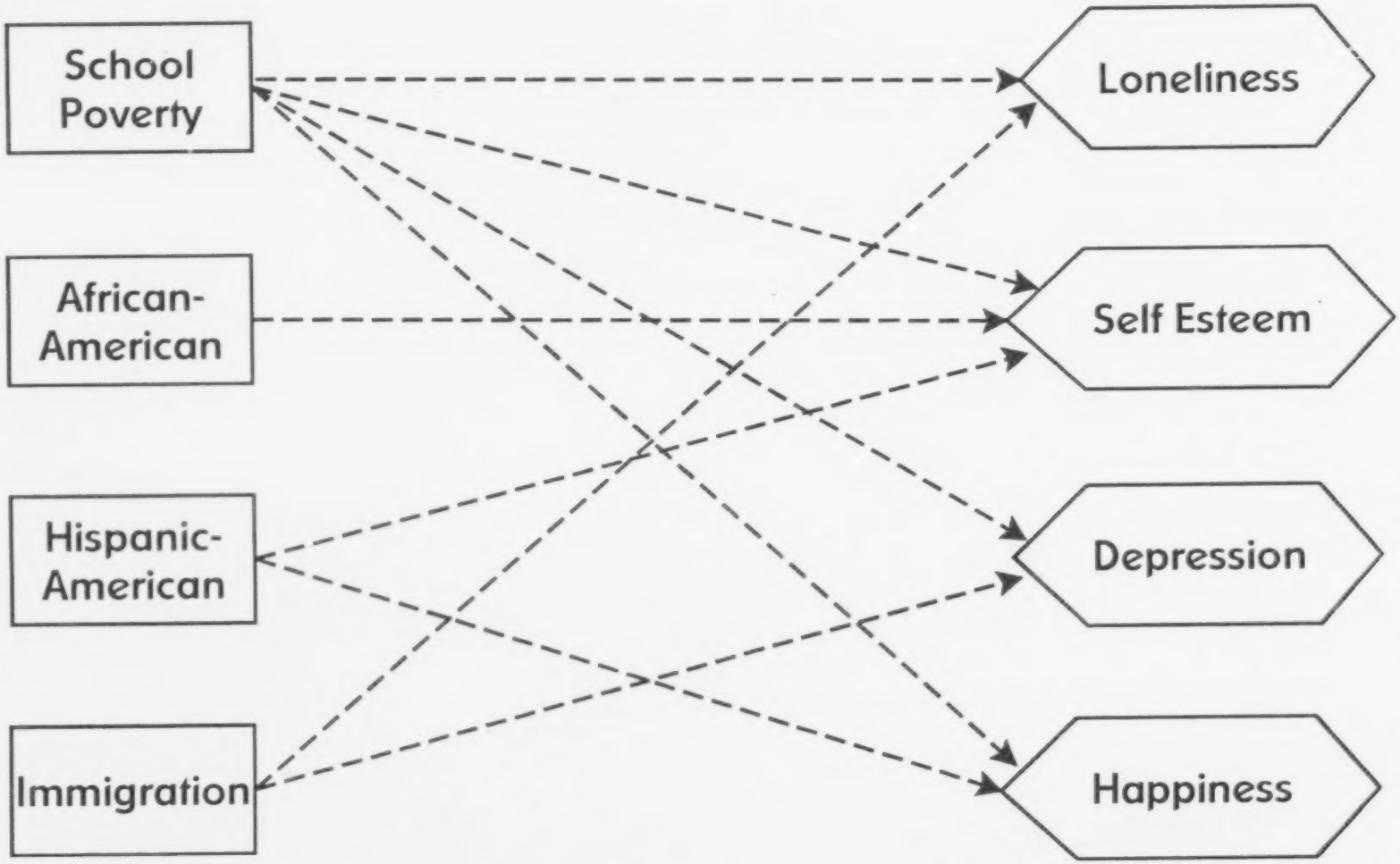
Table 2 Continued: Significant Interactions

	Loneliness		Self Concept		Depression		Happiness	
Predictors	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2	*b*	r^2
Grd.xPr.Sup.			.26*	.01			.32*	.01
Sch.xFr.Sup.	-.30*	.01			-.33*	.01		
Sch.xStress					-.33*	.01		
Sch.xHardship					.45**	.01		
Af.xFr.Sup.							.16*	.01
Hs.xFr.Sup.							.18*	.01
Imm.xPr.Sup.							-.25*	.01

Note. *b* = standardized beta weight; r^2 = the proportion of variance accounted for by each predictor.

****$p < .0001$; ***$p < .001$; **$p < .01$; *$p < .05$. *(Note applies to both tables).*

Direct Effects of Demographic Risk Factors on Well-Being



Stress and Support as Mediators of Well-Being